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Can Russia become a nation-state?*

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Many years ago, before the end of the Soviet Union, I was once staying in one of those dreary jerry-built hotels on the outskirts of Moscow, when I fell ill with some kind of stomach bug. Russian colleagues advised me that the right thing to consume was kefir – a fermented milk product available in most Soviet dairies. I felt myself that kefir was what I wanted, so I dragged myself a few hundred yards to the nearest dairy. There I queued, wilting, for half an hour or so, only to see the last jar of kefir vanish to the purchaser in front of me.

Dispirited and feeling more ill than ever, I returned to the hotel. There I had a bright idea. I went to the office of the administrator, explained my plight and asked her – a bright, efficient-looking woman – if I could buy some kefir from the hotel's stores. No, she said, unfortunately that was not possible: I would have to wait till the restaurant opened, several hours later. Then, however, seeing how crestfallen I was, she looked at her own string-bag in the corner and added, 'But I bought some kefir on the way to work this morning. You can have that if you like.' In the end, not only did she give me all the jars she had bought, but she wouldn't accept any kind of payment for them.

Most regular visitors to Russia will, I think, recognise this incident as characteristic. Of course, in any country there is a split between one's behaviour in an official milieu and in private life. But nowhere is that split as marked as in Russia. Not just on public occasions, but even in the street, when jostling against anonymous humanity, Russians look grim and unsmiling, and their behaviour is regulated according to two principles: (a) what is expected of them, and (b) perhaps even more basic, what requires the minimum of effort. When they are relaxing among friends and family, however, they are as warm, open and accepting as any other people, perhaps even more so as a result of the long periods of restraint.

It always takes foreigners some time to adjust to the extent of the contrast between public and private life. I believe it is part of a larger pattern, running right through the history of Russian society. It goes right back at least to the sixteenth century, when Muscovy began to turn itself into a Eurasian empire and a European great power. Since that time there

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has always been a strongly marked polarity between state and local community, between *gosudarstvo* and *zemlia*, to use the terminology of the time. Both state and local community have usually been very strong. The state has overseen the conquest and administration of one of the most extensive and diverse empires in world history; the local community has provided the means to achieve this, and has also, no less remarkably, survived in extremely adverse geopolitical and climatic circumstances. The state operated by means of impersonal authority, bureaucracy, command and hierarchy; the local community through personal authority, joint responsibility, consultation and person-to-person contact. The problem is that there has been almost nothing to mediate between *gosudarstvo* and *zemlia* – no intermediate institutions of the kind that Montesquieu and Tocqueville identified as the most reliable bulwarks against despotism; no civil society, to use a term current in the eighteenth century and recently revived in social science theory.

The extent of the divide has had fateful consequences. Over the centuries the state has repeatedly tried to reform Russian society, to make it more productive and to fit it to support the empire's role in great power politics. Local communities have usually resisted those reforms. Having learnt that certain patterns of behaviour ensured survival, in spite of all the hazards of existence on the cold and vulnerable north Eurasian plain, local people clung to those patterns through thick and thin. The resulting intense conservatism usually meant that the state's reforming efforts fetched up against uncomprehending – perhaps deliberately uncomprehending – resistance from local communities (Akhiezer 1992, 1993, 1994; Khoros 1993).

A particularly dramatic example of this kind was the series of reforms introduced by Peter the Great in the early eighteenth century, which included the building of a navy, changes in army recruitment and taxation, the introduction of new educational patterns and a new style of dress and social life at court and among the nobility. Peter's brisk way with those reluctant to change was illustrated by his habit of personally applying the shears to courtiers who refused to shave off their beards.

The aim of these reforms was to prepare Russia to be a great European power, up to date in manners, culture and technology. The paradox was that Peter could only achieve this aim by intensifying some of the most archaic aspects of Russian life – serfdom and the mutual responsibility of local communities for taxation – and by widening the split between the state and those local communities. Henceforth the rift became not just administrative but cultural as well. One might almost say ethnic, since Russia's elites during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – nobles, army officers, the growing educated middle class – followed a way of life which was based on foreign, especially French and German, models. It was partly a matter of clothes, life style and language, but partly also a different outlook on the fundamentals of social life: authority, tradition, religion, law, property. These differences were the fundamental cause of the extremely violent and

bitter revolution of 1917–21, vividly portrayed by Orlando Figes in his recent book *A People's Tragedy*. The Marquis de Custine both prophesied and diagnosed this upheaval as early as 1839, when he forecast that one day there would be a 'revolution of the bearded against the beardless' (Custine 1854: 455).

I do not want to give the impression that Russia's elites were unpatriotic, or un-Russian. On the contrary, they were probably Russia's first conscious patriots. But I would define their Russian-ness as being distinct from that of the people. In the Russian language there are two words for Russian: *Rossiiskii* and *Russkii*. The first is used to describe the state, the territory, the multinational empire, the second to describe the language, the culture and the life of ethnic Russians as distinct from non-Russians. The elites had an outlook on Russia which was definitely *rossiiskii*, which was proud of Russia's strength, diversity and great power status. As Pushkin once said, 'Our fatherland is Tsarskoe Selo' (Hosking, 1997a: introduction and 159–61).[1]

The links between the two sides of the great divide – state and local community, elites and masses – were tenuous, and depended on personal relationships more than on institutions. The state for the most part left local communities to their own devices, intruding upon them only in the persons of the policeman, the tax-collector and the recruiting sergeant – some of whom could be bribed and some of whom could not. Otherwise the only intermediary for the majority of peasants was the local landowner, who was quite often the recruiting sergeant himself, acting personally or through his steward. On top of that, he was normally sheriff, judge and tax-collector rolled into one.

Imperial Russia, in fact, from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries was a dauntingly effective state by the standards of the time, but one whose sinews consisted of patron–client relationships, with the landlord as patron, supportive or oppressive as fate willed, and the peasants as clients. That remained true to a considerable extent even after the abolition of serfdom in 1861. The institutions of civil society, law courts, elective *zemstvos* and so on, created in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, had shallow roots and proved fragile and difficult to work in practice.

Neither in the civic nor in the ethnic sense, then, was Russia a nation by 1917. Did the Soviet Union change that situation?

In one sense the Soviet Union was obviously *less* Russian than its predecessor. There is no indication of Russia in its name: it was intended to be merely the nursery of international socialism, and hence was better without any ethnic or geographic designation. Furthermore, in its early years, the new state deliberately set out to foster the flowering of *non*-Russian nationalities, by awarding them ethnically named territories – the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, the Bashkir Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic and so on – by training indigenous cadres to run those

republics, and by using the languages of their nationalities as a medium for education, propaganda and culture. In this way, many languages which had previously existed as clusters of spoken dialects were endowed with a full grammatical structure and a literary mode of expression.

Valerii Tishkov, who was for a time minister for nationalities under Yeltsin, has described what took place in those early years as 'ethnic engineering'. Ethnographers were sent into the regions to collect data on language, religion, customs, the economy, tribal allegiances and so on, and to fashion this data into the raw material of nationhood, in some cases synthetically 'engineering' nationalities into existence in place of previous tribal conglomerates (Tishkov 1997: 15–21 and ch. 2).

With older nations being consolidated and new nations being created all around them, where did this leave the Russians? Rather in the plight wittily outlined recently by the Russian-American scholar Yuri Slezkine. He likens the Soviet Union to a communal apartment, in which each nationality had its own room and got on with its own life. The Russians, on the other hand, occupied the hallway, the kitchen and the bathroom: they ran the place and got in everyone else's way, but had no room of their own (Slezkine 1994).

Vladimir Zhirinovskii, in his autobiography, expressed a similar thought in rather different terms. To him the Russians were unambiguously victims. The social upheavals of the twentieth century meant that they became 'a nation on wheels ... lurching over the ruts of endless cart-tracks. Families and kinship ties were destroyed, traditions undermined and archives lost.' The old Russian fortress town of Vernyi (which means 'loyal') became Alma Ata, in the Kazakh Autonomous Republic, which itself became the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic, then the independent state of Kazakhstan, while the Russians who lived there were passed over in favour of Kazakhs when it came to jobs and housing (Zhirinovskii 1993: 19–20).

All the same, I shall argue that the Soviet Union did a good deal to strengthen the Russian sense of national identity too. For one thing, the communist project was a distinctively Russian one. Internationalist millenarianism might well be considered a Russian speciality, going back to the fifteenth and sixteenth century idea of Moscow as the 'third Rome', the 'second Jerusalem', the centre of the one true Christian realm (after the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks), chosen by God to bring the true faith both to heretics and to infidels. Imperial Russian officials had always been slightly apprehensive of this outlook, perhaps because it implied that the church was superior to the state. But the concept caught on among clerics and among the mass of the people. Driven underground by the imperial state, it left behind a residue of popular eschatology which re-emerged in the nineteenth century in the form of millenarian socialism, as expounded by Bakunin, by Narodnaia Volia and later by Lenin.[2]

The ideal of socio-economic egalitarianism was also a distinctively Russian one which became embodied in the official ideology of the Soviet state. The mutual dependence forced on local communities by Russian

geography and climate had over the centuries become a habit and had generated a mentality which viewed with disapproval conspicuous degrees of either wealth or poverty. Egalitarianism had been reinforced within the village community by the widespread custom of periodic redistribution of strips of arable land. But in tsarist Russia it was never actually an official doctrine. By contrast, the Soviet Union – whose name was derived from local communities, in their revolutionary form of 1905 and 1917 – made egalitarianism into an ideal. Even though Stalin officially repudiated it in a famous speech in 1931, when he called it a 'petty bourgeois prejudice', it remained enshrined in the hearts of the population. Surveys among post-Second World War *émigrés* – not on the whole favourably disposed towards the Soviet state – nevertheless showed that the Soviet social welfare system was very widely appreciated among the population as a whole (Inkeles and Bauer 1968: 233–42).

So the idea of a millenarian empire which would one day create a harmonious egalitarian community was an integral part of the Russian tradition.

Perhaps most important of all, though, great power status in itself was both a thoroughly Russian concept, and a thoroughly Russian practice, which could easily be divorced from millenarianism. The Soviet Union was in territorial extent similar to the old Imperial Russia, and most of its rulers, especially after the mid-1930s, were Russians. Russian was the language of the state and the armed forces, and also the medium of inter-ethnic communication. In the course of the five-year plans, Russians, both as specialists and as manual workers, resettled in large numbers in non-Russian areas. They were not representatives of a master race, as for example the British were in India, but still they were a constant reminder that the Union was Russian-dominated. I remember walking round the streets of Tartu in 1990 with an outspoken Estonian nationalist, and whenever we passed someone who either looked Russian or was dressed in the uniform of the Red Army he spat out contemptuously the single word 'Occupiers!'

In spite of the evidence presented by this fervent Estonian, in many non-Russian territories the permanent Russian presence did succeed in instilling among local people a national identity which might be called *rossiiskii* rather than *russkii*. Already in the nineteenth century, some Russians, notably Dostoevskii and the flamboyant newspaper editor Mikhail Katkov, had argued that Russia was a kind of super-nation, chosen by history to assimilate and bring to fruition the nationhood of others, on condition that they kept their nationhood purely cultural and linguistic, while acknowledging the Russians' right to impose statehood on them. This did not work well as a policy in tsarist Russia, but one might argue that the communists, having at their disposal a mass education system, a penetrative propaganda network and a pliant mass media, succeeded where Katkov failed, and managed to give the Yakuts, the Bashkirs and even most Ukrainians a national identity subsumed in Russian-Soviet statehood.

The five-year plans and the Second World War both served to promote this kind of Russification; the five-year plans because they aimed to modernise and strengthen the empire in the face of hostility from more advanced countries. As the novelist Konstantin Simonov said, recalling the 1930s, 'Thoughts of the Red army and the five-year plan were welded together by the fact of capitalist encirclement. If we could not build everything we had decided to, then we would be defenceless, we would not be able to fight and would go under if anyone attacked us' (Simonov 1989: 18).

The Second World War deepened this effect. Ideologists had taught that any future war fought by the Soviet state would be a class war conducted by taking the offensive to the enemy, while the workers of the target country overthrew their oppressors and welcomed in their liberators. It would therefore be a relatively bloodless victory. Of course, it turned out to be nothing of the sort. Instead it was a defensive and enormously costly war, and above all a national one, in which the enemy was the Germans rather than the imperialists. Victory in such a war provided the psychological prerequisites for the creation of a Soviet nation on the basis of a multi-ethnic *rossiiskii* culture. By the late 1940s the Soviet Union was on the way to becoming a huge compound nation-state, rather as imperial China had done over many centuries.

This was not least because the Soviet cultural and education systems had done a great deal to heal the rift between elites and masses which had existed in imperial Russia. And here I am talking above all about the ethnic Russians, though it was true of the non-Russians as well. Soviet education made them nearly all literate, and taught them a Russian language and culture based on a politicised version of the old imperial culture (the attempt to create a new proletarian culture was abandoned quite early on). So the Russian language became more uniform among all social classes, assimilating a variety of usages which had earlier been non-standard, that is, associated with a particular region or with a lower social class. Army barracks, building sites, communal apartments and labour camps acted as a kind of currency exchange for the language, compelling people to adjust to linguistic registers which before 1917 they would scarcely have encountered. In the end this penetrated even into literature: popular speech became a literary norm (Comrie, Stone, Polinsky 1996). I well recall the shock with which I read Solzhenitsyn's *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* soon after it first came out in 1962. As a final-year undergraduate, brought up on Tolstoy and Chekhov, I fancied I understood Russian quite well, but I found Solzhenitsyn very tough going – in fact, to begin with I wondered if it was written in Ukrainian or Bulgarian – so great were the demotic imports into the literary language by that time.

A new popular culture came into being too. People of all social origins sang the same songs, heard the same radio broadcasts, watched the same films and the same *estrada* (variety theatre) shows. New festivals and public holidays were instituted and took a long time to be generally accepted, since

they were atheist and replaced traditional religious festivals. But in the end, especially after the Second World War, they spanned all social classes (Lane 1981; *Russkie* 1992, 312–35).

Yet no nation-state emerged. On the contrary, a few decades later the Soviet Union disintegrated, falling apart along national fault-lines – those created by the Soviet leaders themselves when they set up those ethnically named republics back in the 1920s. So what went wrong?

Partly, it was that some Soviet nationalities, for historical reasons, never accepted the 'big brother Russia' syndrome. Prominent among them were the recently assimilated Baltic nations, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and also the west Ukrainians, who had been in the Habsburg Monarchy, then Poland, but never before 1939 in Russia. Then there were some of the north Caucasian peoples, those whom Stalin had selected for mass deportation at the end of the war, notably the Chechens. The Georgians were probably reconciled to Russian-Soviet domination only as long as Stalin, one of their own, was in charge.

Besides, some of the Soviet methods of dismantling cultural barriers were extremely brutal. They may have promoted ethnic uniformity, but they certainly discouraged the creation of any civic sense of nationhood. By abolishing the peasant commune, the *mir*, and nearly destroying the Russian Orthodox Church, the Soviet state undermined the self-renewing sources of the old popular culture. It bulldozed the terrain occupied by demotic institutions and traditions and left the way clear for the elite culture to become the universal norm, reinforced through the educational system, propaganda and the mass media. Russians have today a more or less unified culture, but one which has about it the lingering whiff of scorched earth. Without an accompanying civic culture, it can go only a certain way towards giving them the feeling of belonging to a single nation.

In short, as in imperial Russia, it seems to me, the fundamental reason for the collapse of the Soviet Union was the failure after the Second World War to create civic institutions which could embody and give expression to the emerging inter-ethnic solidarity. The Communist Party ruled through the *nomenklatura* system, which was an updated, centralised and systematised version of the patron-client relationships which had held tsarist Russia together. The *nomenklatura* bosses clung to the monopoly power which this system gave them, and left no scope for the creation of any kind of civic institutions. Soldiers returning from the front, full of the idealism of victory, found that there was no obvious place for them in post-war Soviet society, where the bosses took all the prizes and treated them as subjects, or at best as dependent clients, not as citizens (Seniavskaia 1995: 161–68; Zubkova 1993: ch. 1).

When the Soviet Union fell part, moreover, though non-Russian nationalism was a major contributory factor, the decisive one was probably the ambitions of the *nomenklatura* bosses in the non-Russian republics. They watched the erosion of the Communist Party's authority with

consternation, but also with a sense of opportunity dawning. On the one hand, they could no longer rely on the automatic support of Moscow in any crisis. On the other hand, they now had the chance perhaps to become international leaders playing on the world stage in their own right. In 1992, Valerii Tishkov escorted Mircea Snegur, president of the newly independent Moldovan Republic, from Moscow airport to the luxurious special residence on the Lenin Hills reserved for visiting heads of state. Snegur said to him: 'You know, before, we were not even allowed inside these gates. Now we are treated like real people' (Tishkov 1997: 44–5).

'Treated like real people': strange that high officials of the old Union republics had to secede to get that feeling! The Soviet system failed, then, to generate a civic culture, even for those just below the very apex of power.

Things have changed now, but not completely. One cannot say that no civic institutions are in place in today's Russia. There is a constitution, a good deal of freedom of speech, an elected presidency, an elected parliament and local assemblies. Furthermore, people participate in the elections. But all the same, most Russians do not really feel they have a stake in those institutions. They suspect – rightly – that they are run for the benefit of new-style post-Soviet patron–client networks.

In any case, on what basis and within which frontiers should the new Russia be created? On this matter, fundamental to any nation-state, Russians are still deeply divided. Broadly speaking, there are four ways in which the 'Russian nation' might be defined today.

(1) In terms of Russia's imperial mission, as the creator and sustainer of a great multi-ethnic Eurasian empire. This is the view which has the firmest historical basis. It was preached in the nineteenth century by Danilevskii, Katkov and Dostoevskii. It was, as I have suggested, the practical (though not theoretical) aim of Soviet nationalities policy, and its attractiveness was revived, even as the Soviet Union was breaking up, by the publication of the works of Lev Gumilev, maverick ethnographer who bore a martyr's crown as son of the poet Anna Akhmatova and long-term inmate of the Gulag Archipelago. Furthermore, the Communist Party has now abandoned its Soviet-era ideological inhibitions and, under the leadership of Gennadii Ziuganov, has wholeheartedly taken over this version of nationhood, in the process cobbling together an alliance with its erstwhile arch-enemy, the Russian Orthodox Church.

The problem about this concept is that it is difficult to imagine the independent republics of Eurasia, other than perhaps Belorussia, resubmitting voluntarily to a Russian-led confederation, however decentralised. And it is equally difficult to imagine the Russian population having the stomach, or the army having the capacity, to force them into such an association.

(2) Alternatively, one could imagine the Russians as a community of East Slavs. This would imply a much more limited reintegration of the old Soviet Union – essentially Belorussia, Ukraine and northern Kazakhstan – and would also be far closer to what we normally mean by 'nation-state'. It is

the vision expounded by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who identified far earlier than most of us the weakness of the Soviet Union. Many communists would probably settle for it, acknowledging that their maximum programme is impracticable.

The trouble is that even this stripped-down semi-imperial Russian nationalism is scarcely more realisable than the full-scale version. It might suit the Belorussians, but it would mean a major international crisis involving Kazakhstan, and it is difficult to imagine west Ukrainians accepting it voluntarily.

(3) Perhaps, then, we should see Russians as a community of Russian-speakers. This was the view taken by the Congress of Russian Communities, with which Aleksandr Lebed was associated during the parliamentary and presidential elections of 1995–6. It does not necessarily aim at reintegrating all Russians, thus defined, within one state, but it does aim at gaining recognition for the right of the Russian Federation to act as a spokesman for them, whichever state they may live in. Not surprisingly, the other republics of the old Soviet Union are reluctant to concede that any foreign state has such rights, and, except for Turkmenistan and Tadjikistan, none of them has been prepared to allow Russian-speakers within their borders to have dual citizenship with the Russian Federation.

(4) Finally, we could regard the Russian nation as consisting of all the citizens of the Russian Federation. This implies a civic definition of nationhood which runs counter to Russian traditions, but it used to be the official policy of the government of the Russian Federation, even though one cannot say that it was ever pursued consistently. Its most intelligent exponent has been Valerii Tishkov, who was head of the State Committee on Nationalities for a few months in 1992 and is now director of the Institute of Ethnography in the Russian Academy of Sciences.

There are many problems with it. It is historically very weakly grounded. The present borders of the Russian Federation are those which arose more or less accidentally only a few years ago on the collapse of the Soviet Union: essentially, what was left over when the other republics broke away. Besides, it fits awkwardly with the continued existence of ethnically named autonomous republics on the territory of the Russian Federation: Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Yakutiia and so on. Chechnia is a special case, but dramatises the problem. Ethnically unmarked common citizenship of the Russian Federation would leave the leaders of those republics with no more powers than those of the governors of Riazan or Pskov oblast.

All the same, it seems to me to be the form of Russian nationhood most likely to be adopted, more or less *faute de mieux*. There are many cases in history when the borders of a nation have been established by fortuitous developments. Over time – admittedly over a long time, several decades at the least – people simply get used to them and adjust to them. And perhaps one could conceive of Russia as a compound nation, on a larger and more complex scale what Great Britain has been for nearly 300 years, with the

Welsh, the Scots and some of the Irish moderately content to be stakeholders in an English-dominated state. The historical foundations for *that* kind of inter-ethnic coexistence are good in Russia, since most of the non-Russian ethnic groups within the Federation have been part of Russia for at least 200 years, in some cases more than 400, and have become firmly part of the Russian political and cultural ecumene.

Yeltsin's government has veered back and forth between these versions of Russian nationhood. The symbols of statehood accepted today include both the hammer and sickle and the imperial double eagle, while in Moscow objects of officially approved pilgrimage include both Lenin's mausoleum and the newly restored Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. Meanwhile, nobody can decide what the national anthem is. In July 1996, as if aware of the incoherence of his national policy, Yeltsin called on intellectuals to set about the elaboration of a new 'national idea'. As far as I know, they have not made much progress.

In the meantime, most educated Russians themselves probably regard their nation as being defined primarily by language and culture. These are what was disseminated to all the population by the Soviet education system, and they have remained fairly stable while states, ideologies, borders and even officially propounded national histories have changed with bewildering rapidity.[3] The greatest grievance which today's intelligentsia has against Yeltsin's regime is that it has done nothing to protect culture, education and scholarship against the ravages of the market. In retrospect, the Soviet regime, which valued intellectuals because it valued ideology, looks like the sponsor of a past golden age.

When I began to visit the Soviet Union regularly, in the mid-sixties, I found an intense and lively literary life. It was almost as if Russian intellectuals made up for their deprivations under the Soviet regime by retreating into a world of intense personal relationships coloured by scholarship and literature. Of course, one must allow for my untypical viewpoint, as an eager research student studying history but also keenly interested in literature, always anxious to meet people who could give me an insight into the great writers of twentieth-century Russia. However I do not believe my experience was wholly misleading. Whatever else the Soviet system had or had not achieved, it had taught the Russian people to read. Furthermore, it had done so on the basis of a politicised variant of the old imperial culture. This meant that many Russians took culture seriously, and what they understood by their own culture was not so much the synthetic products of socialist realism as the great works of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, even though these might be inconsistent with official ideology – more or less as Victorian Christian gentlemen were brought up on the doctrinally unsound pagan classics of Greece and Rome. Furthermore, in the absence of a stable civic or ethnic national identity, educated Russians invested many of their hopes in literature as the bearers of an imagined national community.

I found that two writers were constant subjects of conversation and seemed to sum up what Russians were looking for as mentors through whom to understand their own situation and that of their people. They were the novelist Fedor Dostoevskii and the poet Osip Mandelstam: two writers who could scarcely have been more different. One of them could not even bear the nationality of the other.

Of Dostoevskii I will not say much today, as he is widely known. Russians have always singled him out as a writer with a peculiarly intense understanding of human beings, close to them because of his understanding of suffering and by virtue of his Orthodox Christianity. But he also did what neither state nor church had done by his time: he offered them an image of Russia as a nation with its own mission in the world. He reformulated the medieval notion of 'holy Russia' for the Europe of science, material progress and the nation-state. Russia, he preached, was an empire which was destined to play a great and redemptive role in world history not in spite of the humility and suffering of its people, but because of them. The Russians were a 'God-bearing people': more than any other nation they had been marked by the stigmata of Christ, and therefore were able to absorb and assimilate the cultures of other nations without undermining them, indeed providing the conditions for their full flowering. During the Russo-Turkish war of 1877–8, Dostoevskii prophesied that the Russians would conquer Constantinople, the Second Rome, and thereby inaugurate a reign of 'eternal peace' in Europe.[4]

In a country emerging from compulsory atheism into a new and bewildering world in which Russia's power is sharply reduced, one can imagine that this message is attractive, even if it does not constitute practical power politics.

The second author whom I found constantly being discussed and invoked in the late Soviet years was the poet Osip Mandelstam. He is different from Dostoevskii in almost every respect. There is only one thing they have in common: the preaching of greatness based on weakness. But Mandelstam's vision was purely cultural. If Russia's culture was on the margin of Europe, then Mandelstam was on the margin of the margin. He was the son of a Jewish leather-merchant, born in Warsaw, not even in Russia properly speaking, but in Poland. Of his father's culture, he once said: 'My father had absolutely no language; his speech was tongue-tied and languageless. The Russian speech of a Polish Jew? No. The speech of a German Jew? No again ... It was anything in the world, but not a language, neither Russian nor German' (Mandelstam 1965: 90).

However, the family moved to St Petersburg, which means that Mandelstam's 'tongue-tied' father must have been successful enough as a businessman to get into the first guild of merchants: otherwise as a Jew he would not have been allowed to reside outside the Pale. He must also have been sufficiently concerned about culture to send his son to a prestigious school, the Tenishev lycée. Here Osip gained access to the classical culture

of Greece and Rome, as well as to the contemporary cultures of France and Germany.

At the time he began his career, the dominant literary movement was Symbolism, which saw the poet as prophet, with privileged access to a world of occult spiritual truths lying beyond the world of appearances. Mandelstam rejected its portentous doctrines. He rejected too its apocalyptic or millenial tendency: its claim to be pointing the way to a great catastrophe or alternatively a great revelation, which would usher in a new life and a new form of consciousness. The Symbolists, he complained, were 'poor householders', in the sense that they did not sufficiently cherish the world of here and now in which they actually lived.

This was the key to Mandelstam's art: the aspiration to make the present, tangible world inhabitable. And to do this in spite of the disorientation, the sense of cultural homelessness, generated in the early twentieth century first by the modernist movement, then by the First World War and by the Russian revolution. 'To Europeanise and humanise the twentieth century, to provide it with theological warmth: this is the task of those emigrants who survived the shipwreck of the 19th century and were cast by the will of fate upon a new historical continent' (Mandelstam 1979: 144).

In fulfilling this task Mandelstam had, paradoxically, certain advantages which would not have been available to someone more centrally and comfortably situated in one of the focal cultures of Europe. He came, as I have said, from the margin of the margin. In a milieu where everything is in question, then those who are disadvantaged and disinherited, who come from behind, have at least an equal and perhaps a superior chance of finding their way over uncharted territory and rediscovering the landmarks which can restore to human beings a sense of the reason for their existence. Add to this that his margin was really an ancient long-lost axis, for the Jewish heritage is at the origin of Europe's distinguishing cultural tradition, Christianity; and Russia's form of Christianity, the eastern Orthodox one, is certainly no less venerable than the Roman Catholic, which appeared to have all the cultural advantages at the time.

Hence Mandelstam's distinctive role, a characteristically Russian one, a kind of missionary cultural imperialism. He aimed to assimilate European culture, from his Russian-Jewish perspective, and make its riches available to the oppressed and disoriented of the modern world. At the same time he operated from the perspective of the outsider. One of his heroes was Francois Villon, criminal, prisoner and exile of fifteenth century France. Another was Dante Alighieri, also for many years an exile, and a poet whom Mandelstam saw, whether rightly or not, as a man troubled by inner anxiety, an 'internal *raznochinets*', 'overcoming congenital awkwardness with inborn rhythm' and using a raw vernacular Florentine speech instead of Latin, the international language of medieval culture (Mandelstam 1979: 405; Cavanagh 1995: 210–14). In his final years, Mandelstam wrote poems

about Charlie Chaplin, archetypal 'little man', direct, unaffected and victim of the hypertrophied, mechanical life forms of the twentieth century.

There is not much here that is practical politics, not much that can help to reorientate Russians in the post-Cold War world, where their role is much less clear and their influence sharply reduced. All the same, it is important to remember that images of this kind have a hold on the imagination of Russians. There is a distant link between the peaceful, humane aspirations of Mandelstam and the virulent political clowning of Vladimir Zhirinovskii: the sense of a great power, cultural or political, whose ambitions are boundless but whose foundations are weakness and humility.

Haunted by empire, torn apart by bitter historical memories and over-ambitious political doctrines, the Russians have scarcely yet assembled the raw materials out of which they might create a nation-state. Some of the prerequisites are there: a common culture and the skeleton, as yet unfleshed, of a democratic political structure. Given several decades of peace, I believe the Russians will make something out of these. But at the moment, they are still a long way from the nation-state as we understand it.

There is one specific reason for hope, and it lies in the fact that, as I have mentioned, most Russians define nationhood mainly in terms of language and culture. This has tended to discourage the kind of all-in, militarist nationalism which the Serbs have displayed in recent years. The various Russian neo-Cossack movements have not proved convincing in their self-appointed role of militant Russian patriots guarding the frontiers and coming to the rescue of oppressed 'Sudeten' Russians on the other side of them (Lieven, 1998, ch. 6). There are, consequently, much better prospects of peaceful relations between Russia and her neighbours than those which have existed between the former Yugoslav republics.

If there is one thing that the Russian government could do to encourage this tendency and to promote civil peace and national solidarity, it is to invest substantial sums in culture, education and learning, which they have so neglected in recent years. George Soros has done much in this direction: if one or two of the leading Russian financial magnates could bring themselves to follow his example and invest in this way in a peaceful civic Russian nationhood, they could do much to strengthen the stability needed for sustained economic growth and the development of civil society. Then some flesh might begin to clothe that skeleton and we might talk seriously about a Russian nation-state.

Notes

1 Tsarskoe Selo is roughly the equivalent of Versailles: a luxurious residence outside the capital city which was frequently the home of the imperial court. Further on the two types of Russian national identity, see Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire, 1552–1917*, London: HarperCollins (1997a: introduction and 159–61).

2 This theme is expounded more fully in Hosking 1997b.
3 In ordering my thoughts on post-Soviet Russian national identity, I am indebted to Vera Tolz, 1997, and Tolz 1998.
4 Further on Dostoevskii's role in Russian national identity, see Hosking 1997a (304–8).

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